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## THE PEARL AND THE WOMAN

THIS is not a story as the title would seem to indicate. Pearls cause much talk about themselves at present. Quite naturally they abuse the favor which the ruling fashion accords them. For some years they have been disparaging considerably the stones most generally prized. To tell the truth, the jewels, the furs, the laces, feminine ornaments which formerly represented a real and almost constant value, fluctuate in our day between greatness and decadence, like mere nations, according to the autocratic whims of snobism; that is to say, the artificial market prices that the stock-jobbers or professional forestallers create. Their fate may be told in a few words, naturally in lapidary style.

The trinket, the necklace, the pin, the ring, costing a thousand dollars, is not worth more than five hundred after it is in our hands, and a hundred when the fancy seizes us to change it or to sell it. After all, what is needed in order to be happy? A little money? Let us be happy then for we will be offered very little, believe me.

Pearls hold a distinguished place in our classical souvenirs about antiquity. Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, a princess who was literary and spoke six languages, it is said, gave them the measure of respect due them in the century which preceded the dawn of the Christian era. It is well known that she amused herself by causing pearls to be dissolved in vinegar, thus mixing,

when she entertained Antony or other lords of spreaded sail, rare drinks which left far behind them at least as far as price was concerned, if not taste, the bizarre mixtures concocted in the most modern cafes. This delicacy is not within the means of everybody and nevertheless however elegant and delicate you may be, fair ladies of today, this act of Cleopatra does not seem to you congenial. It is true that pearls cost you more.

The performance of George Villers, Duke of Buckingham, the choicest flower of the snobs of his time, is better constituted to please you. It will be remembered that the favorite of James I, King of England, when he was sent to France as ambassador, displayed there a luxuriousness that made a sensation, independently of his gallant bearing towards the Queen, Anne of Austria. One night, among others, at a ball given at the Louvre in his honor, he picked off and scattered about him in a negligent manner the pearls with which his clothes were dotted. He sowed thus beneath his feet more than a million's worth, says the chronicle, and the ladies of the court were not sparing in gathering those which rolled within their reach.

Such a windfall is not frequent. And if, as recently happened in London, a passer-by finds at his feet a necklace of pearls valued at six hundred and forty thousand dollars—let us not forget those forty thousand dollars which

give the impression of a valuation at the most exact price; round figures never have a real look—it is rare that he can do what he likes with it or even that he receives a proper recompense for having restored it to its owner.

Whence then comes the pearl to cause such commotion? Is it, like other precious stones a hardened particle of the subterranean fires, a glittering spark set free while forging the armor of the infernal gods, a drop of light formed by the combination of the four elements of the world, or even one of those gems that the genii of darkness cut and polish for the corsage of fairies? No, its origin is less poetical. The pearl is hardly anything but a diseased calculus due to an organic lesion or to a parasitic excitation of molluscs which the most kindly disposed naturalists have been constrained to call oysters or mussels, so stupid they seem to them. What am I saying! That pearl which displays its colors on your slender finger comes perhaps from a process to which the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shuts its eyes, on the pretext doubtless that there is often need of something smaller than one's self. When an oyster believed to be pearl-bearing becomes lazy and does not think it worth while to be ill by herself, there comes man, the indelicate, the trading creature, who, violating her domicile, treacherously introduces a foreign body between the shell and the folds of the oyster, this minute particle will form the nucleus of the future pearl. In a period of time longer or shorter it becomes covered with layers of nacre, one over the other, showing a water brilliance and quality superior to that of pearls formed of cal-

careous substances and simply covered with nacre on the surface.

So the pearl is the order of the day. Of course we have had in the eighteenth century the affair of the queen's necklace, but that was made of diamonds and the necklace was only worth sixteen hundred thousand livres, half the price of the pearl necklace to which we have alluded above. It is true that it had been stolen by a countess while the latter was abstracted by a pick-pocket, modest evidently because he persists in remaining incognito. All the same it is a counter-stroke for the pearl and after all a theft is the best advertisement. Witness the Mona Lisa.

But let the pearl take care! There is always a Tarpeian rock near capitol and the sin of pride sometimes brings about notorious downfalls.

First, the man of science today has succeeded in almost equalling the oyster and manufactures pearls which can deceive, of the same weight and of a water just as perfect. Will there not come a time when it will be decided that there is not enough difference in appearance between a real and a false pearl in proportion to the difference in their price?

And, to keep to the real pearl, there has come up a rather curious case, if we are to believe a recent incident, on which the courts must soon pass. No one is ignorant of the fact that the courts are competent in all affairs and it would be not only admirable but a very convenient thing for the rest of us if they were always in accord with each other or merely with themselves. It is rather distracting in fact for those who profess respect for the institutions of society to see invalidated on appeal

by considerations cast in bronze judgments of the lower courts based on motives equally irrefutable. A cruel enigma which it is more prudent not to examine deeply!

This is the case: ordinarily a pearl taken from its mother oyster is valued at a certain price, varying according to its size and its quality. But, as we have said, a fine pearl is formed of superposed layers of nacre. It happens that on examination, certain professionals—did they scent it or were they inspired?—had the intuition that the layer beneath is still more perfect and that the pearl by means of a scraping at once artistic and scientific can double or triple in value in spite of the reduction of its size.

Recently a "pearl-scraper"—what a fine title for a comic opera! unfortunately Bizet is dead—operated on a pearl valued at twelve thousand dollars, and laid bare the layer dreamed of: the Water at home! The pearl reduced in size is now worth forty thousand dollars. Up to this point there has been nothing irregular according to the Jewelers' Association. Besides, it is a kind of game at which one can lose as easily as he can win.

But the operator re-covered this layer—oh, new layers!—with a so-called preserving coat which one may well believe is not made to injure the beauty of the pearl nor its commercial value.

The process is discovered, the association is excited. It is permitted to pare a pearl as one cuts a precious stone. It is forbidden to disguise it. Complaint . . . Prosecution . . . , etc. *Adhuc sub iudice lis est.*

Is the disguising trickery? Is this

trickery itself a fraud? Is it forbidden to give value by this means to an object of authentic origin and quality? That is the whole question.

It is logical that dealers become alarmed at every pretext that may in panic lead to the lowering of the fabulous prices to which precious stones are rising, prices that become artificial because they are today subject to the changes of fashion. But this rising in arms should make the philosopher smile.

Since the beginning of the world, these multi-colored gems have exercised an unheard-of attraction for mankind, witness the shameless glass trinkets that the adventurers and haggling navigators offered to primitive races, to delighted savages, in exchange for ivory or rare essences, with that superiority in the art of getting the best of a customer which is the characteristic of civilized peoples.

At heart, for our fashionable women, who have sometimes also little savage souls, the great thing, the chief joy is not to possess a jewel of real beauty. We are far from the Renaissance when popes, princes and princesses used to snap up a jewel cut by Benvenuto Cellini. But the object of objects is to have been able to devote to the purchase of any kind of a necklace an enormous sum, and above all a sum which none of their friends or acquaintances could spare for a similar purchase. To receive compliments which are slurred over on coming out of a pretty mouth curved in a smile made to order, while one takes on indifferent or surfeited airs, what pleasure! Those are minutes too easily counted, when life becomes really beautiful.

Alphonse Karr contends that there are no little girls but only women who are littler than others. Permit me to relate this true story:

A young person about ten years old had just received a very pretty dress on the occasion of her birthday. She hurried to show it to her elder sister. The latter, happy in her joy, embraced her, paying her a thousand compliments, and left her.

Left alone the little one became thoughtful and her mother, entering, astonished to see tears in her eyes, asked her:

"What is the matter? You are crying? On a birthday? When you have such a pretty dress?"

"I don't like my dress any more."

"Why?"

"Simone is not jealous!"

The necklace of six hundred and forty thousand dollars seems to me indicated for that child. Fate owes her that compensation.

If I were the President of the court before whom should be unwound the arguments about the disguised pearl, it would interest me to know the opinion of women about the process of the Pearl-Scraper. After all, it is for them that he worked. Are they for it or against it? Do we not see the youngest, the freshest, the prettiest deliber-

ately put rouge on their lips and cheeks, black on their eyebrows, bistre under the eyes and polish on their nails and remain convinced that they are only the more precious? Why refuse this charm to the other pearls?

The Scraper defends himself from the accusation of having used fraud. They do too. Ask this one about the marvellous evolution of her hair which from an original chestnut has suddenly become the color of pure gold.

"I! I use dye? Whom do you take me for? No, I wash my hair in oxygenated water merely. If it has changed its shade that is not my fault."

O Fashion, what crimes are committed in thy name? Dresses which hinder walking, hats like blinders that horses no longer want . . . the massacre of the poor pretty birds of the tropics! One must follow the fashion whatever it costs! Even if one has to suffer, even if one has to be ridiculously bedizened. . . But what have I said! Nothing is ridiculous except not to be in the fashion!

Pardon, dear readers, a chronicler convinced of the real merits of woman for this innocent satire on a feminine irregularity, to which alone you have never offered sacrifice of course. But you will agree with me that all the women of your circle . . . Isn't it so?

PHILIPPE MAQUET.